

E-2C on surveillance mission over Arabian Gulf.



A New Twist in Unconventional War

Undermining Airpower

By GARY C. WEBB

The United States remains at war with Iraq. Since the imposition of no-fly zones, Baghdad has developed a new form of strategic response—unconventional operations targeted at air forces. An American-led coalition exercises dominance over the Iraqi military through air superiority, but this advantage is fragile. We must realize that unconventional warfare against conventional airpower is a

potent and serious threat. Downplaying it will lead to faulty, misguided, incomplete, and even irrelevant responses. Interest in the region is too important to risk defeat by a strategy that could be overcome by a more appropriate use of military force.

Out of Weakness

As one author has observed: “Other countries can challenge the United States effectively by fighting indirectly, moving away from our military strength, and avoiding large concentrations of weapons and men that we can locate and de-

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Launching F/A-18,
Southern Watch.

stroy."¹ Another has warned that this approach is not beyond even small powers:

*The situation, problems, and challenges of the environment, popular support, organization, unity, and external support must be set forth as cogently, comprehensively, and clearly as possible. Once this is done, an overall counterstrategy tailored to relevant problems can be devised.*²

The task for any would-be challenger of U.S. power is to focus limited assets on a point that is both vulnerable and decisive.

Unconventional warfare is a time-honored method of confronting an enemy with superior military capability. Successful stratagems define the capabilities and will of an enemy, determine a style of engagement, and establish an overarching approach to affecting the resolve of the dominant force. The taxonomy used by Mao Tse-tung for revolutionary war presents one of the simplest and most logical prescriptions for guerrillas.³ His phases of revolutionary war include organizing and preserving forces; challenging enemy dominance and will indirectly, covertly, and persistently; and challenging enemy dominance. As practiced by Baghdad unconventional warfare has adhered to this three-phase approach and resulted in an effective counterstrategy.

Preparing the Battlefield

In the initial phase, guerrillas develop doctrine and tactics, acquire technology to challenge enemy will, and create a political base through diplomacy, manipulation, and propaganda. They gather strength and support but do not directly challenge dominance.

While the dominant force remains complacent in its ability to muster overwhelming power, guerrillas seek any possible niche to develop the means to resist. The Iraqis, for example, train at night because allied forces maintain direct control of the skies by day with active patrols and exert only indirect dominance at night by monitoring operations inside the country. Allowing training at night seems a small concession, but it erodes coalition resolve and establishes legitimacy for Iraqi actions. Fighting at night is a new concept and capability for Iraq and represents a tentative step towards developing both the will and capacity to act.

With regard to acquiring the necessary weapons, electronic warfare has emerged as a major way of undermining an air campaign. Electronic means of fighting include highlighting aircraft, uncoordinated missile launches, and the threat of vectoring conventional fighters for aerial combat. As Iraq gains experience, observing the operational practices of the forces supporting Northern and Southern Watch, its options for employing limited electronic warfare assets multiply. It can use electronic intelligence to hide real attack assets or deny electronic intelligence through alternative tactics and unconventional employment. The most effective use of the electromagnetic spectrum is for U.S. forces to not know when they have been attacked. This can be achieved by using friendly and enemy electronic emissions to gather data to evaluate response capabilities of coalition aircraft as well as command, control, intelligence, and targeting systems, all without necessarily inflicting physical harm. When Iraqi radars illuminate aircraft, U.S. forces react to the threat and the enemy documents this action. Moreover, Iraq may lull America into complacency. Repeated activity may be evaluated as nonthreatening. As coalition forces do not react, they will be at risk.

The goals of these initially subtle operations may vary. They could be to force the enemy to remove part of its dominant forces from a theater or compel it to maintain a presence and provide more lucrative targets for future unconventional operations. On the one hand, chipping away at the enemy force structure could ultimately bring about a loss of military dominance, or the escalating costs of maintaining a dominant force may weaken political will. In tentatively reaching for these goals, the guerrilla will use enough force to constitute a threat but not enough to require serious retribution. Iraqi goals appear to be to break containment and the force of U.N. resolutions by undermining the legitimacy of U.S. efforts abroad or eroding domestic support for sanctions and military action. Baghdad may wish to convey that air operations are costly and counterproductive.

It is admittedly difficult to counter unconventional methods on this level of conflict. Time remains on the side of the insurgent. The dominant force is restrained as it waits to see if sanctions are having the desired affect. Thus in the case of Iraq, it is understandable that the United States demonstrated moderation in the wake of Desert Storm as friends and allies argued for time to allow Iraq to comply with ceasefire resolutions. And while the use of force was constrained, the threat to coalition air forces and the ability of Iraq to challenge air containment were extremely low, so there was little need to act vigorously.

The best that can be done is demonstrating both the will and capacity to remain decisively engaged. In some cases, such resolve alone will prove sufficient to deter would-be insurgents.

Challenging a Great Power

Guerrillas test enemy will and resolve by violating sanctions and conducting limited acts or threats of aggression in the second phase. Iraq's long-term responses to a decade of containment reflect elements of this level of traditional unconventional warfare, as Baghdad attempts to wear down the United States and its allies.

A disadvantage for the dominating force is that an enemy learns to adapt, grow, and think out of the box. Thus it attains an advantage from weakness. Meanwhile, the complacent dominant force becomes vulnerable. One analyst has pointed out that "All intelligence is based on pattern recognition. As strategic and operational doctrines generate patterns, they do become predictable. If a force is predictable, it can be defeated."⁴ Air operations over Iraq are particularly susceptible. Nations have different training opportunities, assets, and technology. Coalition practices and force packages are quite predictable because command and control is simplified to facilitate multinational operations among American, Turkish, and British forces. Dominance becomes a vulnerability as actions are driven by consistent operations, ceding initiative and surprise to the enemy.

One must consider the impact of asymmetric warfare on actions in the Persian Gulf. The Iraqis will use any means to achieve small victories that will force the United States to reevaluate its political objectives. Dominance of the air is the most fragile of environments and only requires the loss of political will to break it. Such might be

achieved by downing only one or two aircraft or an inadvertent attack on a nonmilitary target combined with diplomacy, propaganda, and manipulation of the global media by Baghdad. Following the tenets of insurgency, Iraq will attempt to distract the United States to divert air forces to an unexpected threat. Deception will be used as a matter of course. Forces may be fooled to maneuver away from protecting friendly high value air assets. Another means of manipulation is enticing an air attack on innocents. Also as Iraq rebuilds integrated conventional air defenses, its potential to threaten coalition air forces grows.

There are seams in coalition operations that Iraq could exploit to inflict a tactical defeat and public relations disaster. In unconventional warfare there is no distinction between friendly and enemy territory. But America and its allies are constrained by coalition agreements. Cheating is the prerogative and sanctuary of the guerrillas. Although the United States is fighting in the context of international law and strict rules of engagement, unconventional warriors can elect not to conform to moral or legal constraints. Insurgents can shoot down one of their aircraft or cause destruction on the ground and blame the United States. In the case of Northern and Southern Watch, where sensitivity to regional allies as well as international opinion is critical for Washington, the options for Baghdad are bounded only by its imagination.

Countering an insurgency at this stage demands serious effort. The other instruments of power—diplomatic, political, economic, and informational—must be marshalled to support the use of force. This will make the use of military power deliberate and effective and, most importantly, will send a specific and telling message. In turn, insurgents will counter or mitigate the effects of strikes by placing their personnel and equipment in civilian areas, relocating high value assets, and using information operations to discredit enemy actions.

So far the coalition has failed to deter Iraq on the second level of conflict. In retrospect, it is clear the United States was neither sufficiently proactive nor persistent in the use of force. Nor did the attacks that occurred threaten key components of Iraqi power; rather they ceded an ability to slowly but surely rebuild the weapons, doctrine, tactics, and political support to wage an unconventional war. By mitigating the employment of force in the hopes of facilitating the work of U.N. weapons inspectors, in the end the United States lost both the inspection regime and the opportunity to crush Baghdad's counterair campaign at the outset.

guerrillas test enemy will by violating sanctions and conducting limited acts of aggression

C-130 refueling HH-60 during Northern Watch.



39th Communication Squadron (Dawn M. Bolen)

The End Game

If Iraq continues on its current course following the tenets of insurgency warfare, it should be anticipated that U.S. resolve will fail, giving Baghdad a bloodless victory, or that confrontation will escalate to phase three, a direct challenge to American dominance.

if Iraq continues on its current course U.S. resolve will fail

Iraq is likely to follow the traditional course of taking the path that is easiest and most efficient. Here, the insurgent does not need to win. Rather, if the guerrilla is seen to possess the capability to strike randomly and with impunity, the political and military instruments of a great power can be neutralized. Because Iraq seeks to force the United States to abandon dominance or else make the cost militarily or politically prohibitive, attempts to strike at coalition forces either directly or indirectly are likely.

So far the policy of containment has survived phase one and two threats. But the danger

of phase three is more ominous and demands a proactive response if Washington hopes to continue exercising a stabilizing role in the region. If the United States can predict how the strategy of unconventional warfare will be used against its dominance, a counterstrategy can be developed.

One likely tactic will be further campaigns to drive a wedge in the coalition. The guerrilla can indirectly challenge dominance by violating restrictions. A variety of seemingly logical excuses will be offered to induce positive public opinion. The insurgents will continue to push and pull on the edges of dominance until they can openly defy sanctions. If Iraq, for example, can create the illusion of a credible threat, the United States will be forced to commit added forces to prevent an attack or other violation of U.N. sanctions. The increase in operations tempo may cause a coalition member to question the cost effectiveness of its participation.

The guerrilla will cultivate coalition infighting by threatening the weakest members, making the dominant force appear impotent and unable to protect friends and allies; or alternatively, he can strike at the dominant force and elicit a response

F-16CJ over Turkey,
Northern Watch.



U.S. Air Force (Dave Westover)

that will expose weaker members to danger or criticism. Either way the strategy forces the enemy to react on insurgent terms. Fractures in the coalition can be exposed and exploited by targeting the weak, the unsure, or high value assets.

The disadvantage of a direct assault on coalition credibility is that guerrillas must gain a lot of return for the sacrifice. The results must be graphic and suited for propaganda. But insurgents must remain wary. The risk of prematurely escalating conflict is attracting a military response for which they are unprepared.

An alternative strategy for Iraq is merely extending confrontation by prolonging the shift to phase three. Baghdad could develop offensive and defensive capabilities without actually attacking U.S. assets, doing enough to induce America to continue or increase its regional commitments. Maintaining theater forces is costly, drives up operational tempo, and affects morale. Washington may eventually find containment too costly.

Counterstrike

Understanding likely future Iraqi strategies is only the first step. The next is organizing the components of an effective counterstrategy. Currently, the United States uses a strategy of direct dominance. American power is retained with the continuous presence of air forces. This requires all elements of the total force needed in order to project airpower, including intelligence, command and control, battle management, and offensive and defensive systems, as well as political capital to keep the force in the field.

Direct dominance, if executed properly and decisively, is appropriate for dealing with phase two threats when insurgent forces are still weak,

but as time wears on it becomes more of a burden than an asset. Direct dominance is both extraordinarily expensive and visible, hence it stresses the will and capacity to act while providing lucrative targets for insurgents. Unconventional warfare is most effective against a strategy of direct dominance, which explains why, in large part, the United States continues to have difficulty enforcing sanctions against Iraq and why enforcing the no-fly zones is increasingly burdensome.

Washington should consider an alternative strategy. Indirect dominance calls for removing the preponderance of the force structure from the theater, both depriving the enemy of ready targets and reducing costs. Rather than enforcing sanctions, indirect dominance focuses on the responses to violations. The focus of offensive action shifts from providing self protection for enforcement monitors to punishment for broken sanctions. The key is striking with overwhelming force when challenged. The responses need not be immediate, but operations must be calculated and credible. Insurgents are on the defensive because they do not know where or when the dominant power will choose to enforce its will.

Indirect dominance puts insurgents at a disadvantage. Without a list of available targets, guerrillas have to wage a reactive war. They can no longer calculate the immediate cause and effect of offensive action. They are not able to undertake a series of independent strikes, chipping away at force structure or making the cost of keeping forces in theater prohibitive. In addition, the threat of retaliation may discourage insurgents from acts of terrorism and hijacking.

The transformation of the Air Force deals with the requirements for an indirect dominance force. The service restructuring is largely solving the challenges of increased operations tempo and personnel demands. Aerospace expeditionary forces can complement assets required for strikes at intercontinental range. In future operations, a team of B-2 bombers, F-22 fighters, and long-range unmanned reconnaissance offers the right platforms, while the continued integration of both air and space operations promises the range of support capabilities needed to facilitate global reach.

It is essential for indirect dominance that the United States maintain sufficient intelligence in theater to monitor Iraqi activities. Since there are likely to be fewer platforms to gather intelligence, strategic assets and interpreting and assessing data, intentions, and capabilities will be critical.

With potentially less information provided by a smaller forward presence, there is a risk of paralysis through analysis in intelligence briefings

S-3 supporting no-fly zone in southern Iraq.



U.S. Navy (Christopher B. Stoltz)

to political leadership. Without overwhelming evidence, there may be a reluctance to act until all political agendas are appeased. The success of indirect dominance is absolutely dependent on focused and decisive political action. The guerrillas seek to blur the truth and splinter coalition resolve and domestic support. If the coalition is strong, indirect dominance is effective. If the coalition is weak, direct dominance is more appropriate. In the latter, military action is more decisive because will is not continuously challenged. Thus one of the first requirements for the United States in moving to the alternative approach of reducing its footprint in theater means rebuilding the political will of the coalition so military might can be forcefully employed when needed.

Unconventional warfare against air superiority has proven increasingly effective. Defeating Iraq and other air insurgents requires recognizing the three phases of conflict, the methods, strengths, and weakness of each, and the appropriate means to defeat them. America must maintain a flexible strategy. The proper response to threats in phase one is posturing to dominate on

land, at sea, and in the air. Phase two responses need overwhelming and immediate direct dominance. An enemy must realize that it faces overwhelming force that is unwavering. The appropriate counterstrategy in phase three is transitioning to indirect dominance, thus limiting risks and mitigating expenditures while providing sustainable long-term deterrence.

A counterstrategy using a transition from direct to indirect dominance is effective because it disrupts development of insurgent movements and deprives advocates of unconventional warfare of their most effective asset—the initiative. Responding with the appropriate force in a timely way is key to maintaining airpower as an instrument of deterrence and containment. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Bevin Alexander, *The Future of War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), p. 105.

² Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington: Brassey's, 1990), p. 15.

³ Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 20.

⁴ Interview with Grant T. Hammond, October 25, 2000.